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AUTHOR Zivanovic, Judith
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ABSTRACT

An examination of Albert Camus' definition of the actor in "The Myth on Sisyphus" helps to illuminate the character and role of The Player in Tom Stoppard's play and, hence, to bring light to an understanding of the philosophy of the play itself. The actor, for Camus, reveals our mortality in the face of the absurdity of our mortality, but also our potentiality and our liberty to act and establish meaning in the face of inherent meaninglessness. Stoppard's character The Player sees his role as does Camus. He shows death, the necessary truth. He requires an audience for his existence. He communicates life's normal state of uncertainty: that it is useless to seek revelation, but that the actor must nevertheless take action, not always questioning what went wrong, but acting on assumptions. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the play's anti-heroes because they have never acted in any sense, remaining caught up in the external control of others. Still unwilling to accept the fact that there are no explanations for life or for their situations, they exemplify the opposite of Camus' assessment of Hamlet as representing "the human revolt against the irremedial." They choose to follow orders, preferring "life in a box" to the taking up of Sisyphus' "rock" of uncertain, personal action. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak by omission to Stoppard's point of view; it is The Player who is afforded the overt task. (DS)

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CALIBAN'S ACTOR AS TOM STOPPARD'S PLAYER; A KEY TO INTERPRETING ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

by

Dr. Judith Zivanovic, South Dakota State University

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> In Hamlet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are shallow, indistinguishable young men who by command forget their friendship for their prince to perform without question commands from their king. . . . Though certainly clever, Stoppard has not been able to invest them with any real dramatic purpose beyond their original creator's.[1]

The above critical commentary which assesses Stoppard as having contributed nothing dramatically new to the treatment of Shakespeare's two characters is met with widespread disagreement by other critics, including this writer. Still, there is a good deal of disagreement within this disagreement. Some critics insist that the play depicts our own fatalistic "condemnation" in the plight of these characters, forced to serve the same roles and face the same doom in a second play in which they simply "meditate on their predestination."[2] Other critics reflect on the existential search for meaning of the two characters, generally concluding that they were not up to the task.[3]

It is the viewpoint of this writer that a crucial key to revealing the "dramatic purpose" of the play is to be found in examining another area of disagreement with the initially quoted critic. He accuses Stoppard of stumbling back and forth with Hamlet as a metaphor for life and art, and thus giving us the Player who "is always discoursing, in a somewhat threatening manner, on the arts of the stage." This, the writer argues, "gets in the way" of any clear meaning.[4] The play does indeed examine both life and art but it is the contention of this paper that, quite the contrary of obstructing meaning, the Player, as a Stoppardian Chorus,

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speaks of both life and art, and, in fact, his discussions of the latter are generally analogous to or otherwise enlighten the former.

It should be noted at the outset that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the actors, principally, the Player, are the only characters from Hamlet who do and say things which are not in the original script. As we know what occurs in the original script, it would be logical to assume that anything we are about to learn of Stoppard's dramatic purpose will be forthcoming from the actions and words of these three characters. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ultimately do exactly what they do in the original, it is the Player who would be most likely to stand largely apart from the action and comment on it. This, of course, he does. Sometimes his comments are clearly philosophical and straightforward; on other occasions, he addresses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with what John Simon terms "double and multiple entendres." Yet Simon concurs that the players are to be taken on the level of ordinary human beings and as "prophets or swayers of the future (life imitates art), and thus above the natural order, higher than ordinary life."[5] How then are we to decipher what the prophets have to offer in their double and multiple entendres? Due to the many similarities in thought, and as will be seen, manners of expressing that thought, between Albert Camus in his discussion of the actor's role in The Myth of Sisyphus and Tom Stoppard in this play, it is contended herein that an examination of this concept in Camus will illuminate Stoppard. This being the case, the paper will examine, first, Camus' definition of the actor and the philosophical revelations that an actor can provide society, second, examine this definition as it appears to be reflected in The Player, and, finally, draw from this effort overall conclusions about the philosophy of the play.

Man's fate as seen by Camus is encompassed by the fact that he must die: a rational, human being (the ultimate that can be said of any creature) begins the trek toward death from the moment of conception. Likewise, a conscious being must become aware that there is no set truth or discernible meaning in life. Thus, for Camus it does not make any sense to waste valuable time searching for meaning in life. There is no inherent meaning; life is irrational and has only the meaning we give to it with our actions. As Germaine Brée notes, Camus proclaims that the "value of life cannot be stated in terms of its meaning and must be stated in terms of the way it is lived."[6] If we accept the absurdity of a meaningless life ended by death, if we reject suicide and determine to live that life, to act and thus establish meaning, we have gained the ultimate to which a human being can aspire. Simply stated, for Camus, to <u>live</u> as a Man should live is quite enough.

In Camus' view, the actor by his very nature has the enviable role of portraying the fact of life, day after day, and of doing so for the possible edification and awakening of his audience.

The desire to act begins with himself--nothing interests him more than his own potentialities. This notion takes him to the great characters of drama and a desire to experience the many possible fates offered to him. The acting out results in "entering into all these lives, experiencing them in their diversity . . ."[7] In his fascination with the character, he applies himself completely to the project of becoming that character. Within the span of three hours, he can "experience and express a whole exceptional life," and then "he will die in three hours under the mask he

has assumed today."[8]

With that performance comes a crucial link: "In those three hours he travels the whole course of the dead-end path that the man in the audience takes a lifetime to cover."[9] In his relationship with the audience the actor exists in a paradox--in both the lives he reveals and his own short-lived fame, he demonstrates the fleeting nature of life, yet he must have that audience in order to exist as the strange being, the actor. "For him, not to be known /in the classical sense of knowing as experiencing/ is not to act, and not acting is dying a hundred times with all the creatures he would have brought to life or resuscitated."[10]

At the same time, the actor supplies his audience with possibly important awareness in exchange for his rite of life. In his "May fly" struggle he offers each of us a focus on the immediate and our mortality, as well as the realms of our possibility. The actor joins himself with the character and reveals to the audience "that there is no frontier between what a man wants to be and what he is."[11] And this important activity is required of the actor by Camus who heartily rejects any concept of art for art's sake and who insists that "Art cannot be a monologue,"[12] not a private statement of actor for himself alone. When this action of the actor is truly effective, a "miracle" may occur:

> Then, every once in a while, a new world appears, different from the everyday world and yet the same, particular but universal, full of innocent insecurity--called forth for a few hours by the power and longing of genius. That's just it and yet that's not it; the world is nothing and the world is everything--this is the contradictory and tireless cry of every true artist, the cry that keeps him on his feet with

> eyes ever open and that, every once in a while, awakens for all in this world asleep the fleeting and insistent image of a reality we recognize without ever having known it.13

Interestingly, Camus marvels at the actor centuries ago who was willing to lose his or her soul to practice the art of the theatre. Camus reflects that this simply speaks more strongly to his conclusion that the actor above all sees that no "vague threats" of eternal punishment could be more cruel than life's final punishment which the actor accepts wholly. In performance, actors necessarily become aware of their mortality, yet they continue in their art. For them, as with Camus' absurd/aware man in revolt, all death is premature and irreparable, cutting them off from the lives they could create. The actor understands the adventure that is life and ultimately "he knows and can now die" himself.

If the great artistic event occurs before mortality overtakes the artist, he can reveal to his audience the important aspects Camus saw as being revealed in great drama, notably that of such playwrights as Shakespeare. The actor, then, reveals our mortality yet our potentiality and our liberty--in the face of the absurdity of the former, we can still utilize the latter in a perpetual revolt which shouts our humanity to the heavens in concert with those other mortals whose fate may be inextricably linked with our own. The actor may well, then, as John Simon suggested of Stoppard's Player, be our prophet, an extraordinary revealer of necessary truths.

II

The Player of Stoppard's creation, in fact, tells the audience in both actions and words that he sees his role as does Camus. The themes of the troup's plays fit handily into a Camus repertoire--plays of blood, love and rhetoric, which may be occasionally without love or rhetoric, but never without blood. The fact of mortality is always present. As a matter of fact, the troup specializes in showing death, unfortunately the stage death is the only one their audiences will believe. The Player actually relates an incident in which they showed a real death on stage but the audience still refused to accept it. In an extreme statement, this echoes Camus' view that everyone tends to live as though he does not know about death because no one can experience the reality for himself.[15] Guildenstern brings this very point to the Player on two occasions, insisting that the actors cannot possibly show death as they had never experienced it. Still, the Player and Camus appear convinced that the actor can relate necessary insights in this regard. (Stoppard presumably agrees as long as it is not a romanticized death scene which he mocks in his stage directions.)

To the Player the performance necessitates an audience, even if it is an audience of only two. A show-stopping moment in the Guthrie Theater 1976-77 season production of the play occurred when the Player berates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for leaving when the actors considered them present. The actor playing the role built to a crescendo of elocutionary splendor as he expressed the tragic proportions of their situation--acting and then realizing that no one was watching.

The Player equates the magnitude of the situation to having an ordinary person's most intimate moments watched. The Player, kindred to Camus' actor very notably here, assumes his very existence to depend upon someone "watching."[16]

When the Player's audience--both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and ourselves--are watching, a good deal is revealed in the realm of the previously mentioned areas of Camus' and presumably Stoppard's concern. The simplest lines to interpret are naturally the straightforward variety. The Player alerts us at various times to the important philosophical nature of the actors' endeavors. He tells us, for instance, that indeed their work is an analogy with life: "We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else."[17] In Act II, he further elaborates on the possible value of what he does in remarkable similarity to Camus'earlier quoted statement about the potential of the artists at very special moments of creation. The Player states that occasionally, from his material and performance, "there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality."[18] The significance of his remarks should not be missed, therefore, when in Act II he very straightforwardly summarizes a philosophy of life for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who have continued to insist that there must be some special meaning to life which must be revealed to them. The Player states, quite simply, "In our experience, most things end in death. . . . You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough."[19] Previously, he had assured them that "Uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special."[20] The Player continually insists that, despite their uncertainty, they should act, not always questioning and remaining

helpless--they must act "on assumptions."[21]

Such didacticism seems clear enough, provided of course that the Player is granted such spokesman-for-the-playwright capabilities. But Stoppard is not content to have things quite so easy for us; he prefers to have fun with our "language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style."[22] Thus, he employs those double and triple entendres which perplex Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and apparently perplexed the critic who thought Hamlet as a comment on life and art did not illuminate. Taking the position which we have thus far assumed--that the Player's comments on his art are also philosophical comments on life--perhaps we can illuminate the perplexing passages. Very early in the play our actor informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they can pay to get "caught up in the action" of the tragedy their troup will unfold, The Rape of the Sabine Women, and Guildenstern becomes infuriated at the idea that he can take "either part . . . or both . . . with encores."[23] He accuses the Player of being "obscene." On the most ordinary and base level, one could simply conclude that the Player had invited Guildenstern to behave vilely with an actor playing a woman. But Stoppard clearly wants us to see more. The stage directions have the Player pursuing Guildenstern with each remark, while Guildenstern avoids him with an unusually pristine response, backing and turning and finally striking the Player in the face. He says the actors are obscene but this is followed by the strange lines, "It could have been--a bird out of season, dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder. . . . It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way. . . . I was prepared. But it's this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous . . .[24]

Guildenstern was prepared for the unnatural or the grotesque but not to this extent. There seem to be two levels of the obscene here, one, the ordinary interpretation and the other a deeper concept which tells Guildenstern that life itself has no set meaning; that he can, in fact, play any part with no certainty of which is right or which is his. It is the sensation which Camus not only calls the absurd but has referred to as being overcome by the grotesque. Guildenstern later relates the sensation more explicitly when he says, "All your life you live so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when something nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque."[25] (Note the similarity of this account to Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus when he says that the sensation of the absurd is likely to come upon us in the most banal of everyday circumstances; you are seized by it in a sudden wretched fashion "at the corner of the street or in a restaurant's revolving doors."[26]) With this statement and others of similar perception throughout the play, Guildenstern is shown to have made the first step toward becoming Camus' absurd/aware man but as often and conclusively Stoppard shows him failing to act on this recognition but rather engaging in searchs for meaning and fruitless hope for clues, signs, orders or natural occurrences which will direct their lives.

In Act II, another philosophical discussion occurs involving the life/art analogy. The Player describes tragedy as events playing "themselves out to the aesthetic, moral, and logical conclusion," which is "where everyone who is marked for death dies." He points out that no one decides this but rather, "It is written. . . . We're tragedians, you see.

We follow directions--there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means."[27] On the most obvious level we can note from the analogy that everyone is a tragic figure, marked to end unhappily or unluckily, but is it also fatalistic, saying that we have "no choice?" It is important to note who is described as having "no choice"--the Player is talking, not about the analogous characters he plays, but about his own art. He must play the part as it is written; that aspect does not conversely equate with life but as he has said earlier, in what he does, he is "the opposite of people." It is also important to recall that within minutes of this discussion, he states that his particular talent is "melodrama" and relates the important line that this matter may give the light to "crack the shell of mortality." In his role as actor he has no choice in presenting what is "written" but he may reveal to his audience those aspects of life which can benefit human beings to live a life which Camus would say enables them to become aware of their crushing fate without resignation and thereafter to "die unreconciled and not of one's own free will."[29]

The last act reveals Rosencrantz and Guildenstern still unwilling to accept the fact that there are no explanations. The Player in contrast recognizes the absurdity of life but expresses complete willingness to go on--what happens to old actors, he affirms, "They're still acting."[30]

III

Not so for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for they have never acted in any sense. True, they have been caught in the machinations of kings, queens, messengers, princes; foolish old men, but within the boundary of their "fate," possibilities were open to them if they stopped "examining their situation at every step" and began to "act on assumptions."

They conclude their lives thinking that there must have been a point at which they could have said, "No." to this external control of their lives. As Henry Hewes puts it: "most of us are similarly unable to commit ourselves to the recognition of this 'point,' and instead allow our lives to be defined by events until it is too late to resist."[31] In this failure of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to accept the uncertainty of their lives and to act on their own to give it meaning, the two characters exemplify the opposite of Camus' assessment of Hamlet as representing "the human revolt against the irremediable."[32] The two have, on the contrary, allowed themselves to become paralyzed by the "obscenity" or the irremediable. Guildenstern calls out for his "daily cue," any sign or order or action apart from himself which will give life meaning. With what tragic fervor do the two express their regret over the escape of their friend who cannot accompany them and die, thus for them "nothing will be resolved."[33] Moreover, the critic who will grant even a modest credit to Sartre and Camus in the philosophy of Stoppard must note the irony of their final comment, "Well, we'll know better next time."[34]

A critic in the National Review refers to the Player's line about life, "If it was a bet, you wouldn't take it." The critic proceeds to chasten Stoppard for a "missed point," that "we take the gamble every day. In fact, the human glory housed in what Stoppard seems to consider our puny, wretched fleshly envelope is exactly the faith and courage to take the gamble, knowing the odds may be against us." He goes on to negatively judge the usage of Guildenstern's comment, "To be told so little--to such an end--and still, finally, to be denied an explanation--" He notes that "even Sartre and Camus accepted

Rosencrantz's [sic] self-pitying assessment as a given of the earthy condition, a point from which to pioneer new values and attitudes."[35] How well the critic has presented the argument, but it is he who has "missed [the] point," for Stoppard is saying precisely what the criticism accuses him of not saying. His Player, the resilient fellow who assures us that old actors continue to act, does recognize life as a bad bet, extremely uncertain, but he accepts the fact and makes the best of the only game in town. Stoppard does offer a special comment on this point by having his last act on a ship. Guildenstern initially is relieved to be on the ship and "contained" but later complains that "where we went wrong was getting on the boat" which is "contained."[36] Stoppard's boat assuredly further limits his protagonists and almost as assuredly stands as an analogy for the limits on all human life. But within these limits, Stoppard provides his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the information which Shakespeare does not reveal to them--the contents of the letters. Within the confines of their interlocked lives and of their boat, they still have choices, significant choices. And they choose to follow orders rather than act on their own despite the fact that the orders would bring a friend's death and finally seal their own. The outcome for this Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is the same as those in Hamlet but the fact of why the outcome occurs is critical here. Camus, too, uses the analogy of a ship, a slave galley in fact, to illustrate the modern predicament but he requires all those on "the high seas," the artist and "everyone else" to "bend to his oar, without dying if possible--in other words, go on living and creating."[37] Stoppard asks no less.

Rosencrantz's story about preferring life in a box to death provides an interesting parallel and contrast to Camus' Myth of Sisyphus--both

characters select life as preferable to death, even if the life is lived in the most constraining of situations, but Sisyphus takes up his rock while Rosencrantz would wait until someone banged on the lid and told him to come out.[38] The "dramatic purpose" of this play, of our entire trek through Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is told in that contrast.

The National Review critic mistakes the protagonists who do not act, insisting upon explanations, as spokesman for Stoppard. On the contrary, the two characters who never learn, never act, and end with the incredible line, "Well, we'll know better next time" can only speak by omission to Stoppard's point of view. It is the Player who is afforded the expert task as he urges the audience to take the bet and continue to act without certainty, for to be Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be enough.

FOOTNOTES

1 Commentary, (December 1967), p. 83.

2 Robert Brustein, "Waiting for Hamlet," The New Republic (November 4, 1967), p. 25.

3 C. J. Gianakaris, "Absurdism Altered: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," Drama Survey, Vol. VII (1968-69), p. 58. Henry Hewes and John Simon include some additional comments evaluating elements they implicitly or explicitly note as existentialist in their reviews, "The Indifferent Children of Earth," Saturday Review (November 4, 1967), p. 28 and "Who's on First?" Commonweal (November 10, 1967), pp. 171-172, respectively.

4 Commentary, p. 83.

5 Simon, p. 171.

6 Germaine Brée, Camus (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959), p. 205.

7 Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 56.

8 Camus, p. 59.

9 Camus, p. 59.

10 Camus, p. 58.

11 Camus, p. 58.

12 Albert Camus, "The Artist and His Time: Create Dangerously," Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1961), p. 257.

13 "The Artist and His Time," p. 255.

14 The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 62.

15 Myth, p. 44.

16 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 64.

17 Ibid., p. 28.

18 Ibid., p. 83.

19 pp. 122-123.

20 p. 66.

21 p. 67.

22 p. 77.

23 p. 26.

24 p. 27.

25 p. 39.

26 Myth, p. 24.

27 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, pp. 79-80.

28 p. 63.

29 Myth, p. 41.

30 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, p. 115.

31
Hewes, p. 28.

32
Myth, p. 19. In "The Artist and His Time," p. 259, Camus engages in a fascinating discussion concerning the possibility of making the ultimate realistic film, which would be about "a man's life." But he rejects the idea because to be truly realistic it would have to include anyone remotely linked to the life examined and that would be impossible. Camus often noted in his writing the very fact so clear in Hamlet's situation and that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern--the freedom of others with whom our life is intertwined will constrain, perhaps even strongly restrict our freedom, but this does not negate freedom in sufficient measure to prevent giving meaning to any life through action.

33
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, p. 120.

34
p. 126.

35
The National Review (December 12, 1967), p. 1394.

36
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, p. 122.

37
"The Artist and His Time," p. 250.

38
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, p. 71.